Historic, archived document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Radio Service

OFFICE OF INFORMATION

U. S Department of Agriculture

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Friday, February 22, 1935.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "The Washingtons at Home." Information from Journal of Home Economics, February, 1932, and other sources.

--ooOoo--

Let's be arm-chair travelers today, and visit one of the most beautiful of all national shrines, the home of George and Martha Washington at Mount Vernon. The Washingtons lived a simple life, even though everything was done in the grand manner. They rose at daybreak, Mrs. Washington to supervise the manifold household tasks and servants, and Mr. Washington to go to the barns to see that the farm laborers began the day's work properly, and to build his own fire on the library hearth.

Shortly after the Revolution, a guest at Mount Vernon wrote this letter: "They live in great style and with the utmost regularity. Breakfast is on the table at 7 o'clock, dinner at 3, tea at 7 and supper at 9. The hours before breakfast are spent in any manner most agreeable to the individual. After breakfast we work, read or attend to Miss Custis who plays most charmingly on the piano, until about 12 o'clock when we dress for dinner. This is only the females of the family. The male part never make their appearance from the time of breakfast until dinner. Precisely at 9 o'clock the servants call us to supper. We sit at the table until 10 o'clock when we retire to our respective apartments."

If you have ever visited Mount Vernon, you will remember that the kitchen is close to the main house and connected with it by an arcade. Then there are many other buildings -- the storehouse, smokehouse, wash-house, salt-house, spinning house, greenhouse, spring house, milk house, butler's house, servants' quarters, gardner's house -- and an ice-house which Washington always had filled with snow, when the winters were too mild to harvest ice.

Mistress Martha Washington visited most of these buildings every day, followed by a colored woman who carried the "key basket." Martha's grandson, George Washington Parke Custis, has left this picture of her as housekeeper:

"In her dress, though plain, she was so scrupulously neat that ladies often wondered how Mrs. Washington could wear a gown for a week, go through her kitchen and laundries and all the varieties of places in the routine of domestic management, and yet the gown retained its snow-like whiteness, unsullied by a single speck. . ."

And here's an interesting account of life at Mount Vernon: "All the principal food was furnished by the plantation. Vegetables were raised in profusion in the garden. The butter was made in the dairy, and with milk and cream was kept

in the cool spring house near by. Turkeys and chickens were raised on the farm, barrels of sugar were in the pantry, brown sugar to be used by the slaves and for cooking, and lump sugar for the mistress's table. Desserts were all made in the kitchen and consisted principally of pies, puddings, jellies, whips, floating island, sweetmeats, etc. Ice cream was unknown. Yeast powders were not in vogue at this period, and stiffly beaten eggs were principally used to lighten cake dough. For what was known as 'light bread' a combination was used made of hops and potatoes, which was allowed to ferment. The beaten biscuits, so well known below Mason and Dixon's line, and corn cakes, or batter cakes, were the breakfast foods used. The biscuit ingredients were of the simplest kind -- flour, water, and a little shortening -- but the dough was beaten half an hour with a flatiron to lighten it.

"Dinner was the principal meal at Mount Vernon and was decidedly formal, everything being served on the most liberal scale. The dining-room table was always spread with a double cloth, and after the first course, which varied from time to time, but which on one special occasion consisted of oyster soup, beef, mutton, and a number of vegetables, the upper cloth was removed, and the one underneath was quickly loaded with pies, puddings, tarts, jellies, whips, floating island, sweetmeats, etc. In time the second cloth was also removed, and the black walnut table top exposed. Clean glasses were brought and a light wine was served with fruit, raisins, and almonds. Coffee was served at a later hour in the parlor."

That, my gentle listeners, is a description of dinner at Mount Vernon. Supper was a simple meal, consisting principally of fruit and cream and cake and wine.

"Aside from being a notable housekeeper and gracious hostess," I'm still quoting, "Martha Washington is reputed to have attended personally to everything which was for the comfort of her husband. When he returned from long rides over his farm, she always met him with refreshments, frequently sugar cakes, thin biscuits, and hot mulled chocolate. Little wonder George Washington found farm life at Mount Vernon preferable to all the activities and honors of the battlefield or council chamber."

Now, in conclusion, I want to read you a few lines written by a friend of mine who lives in Washington, D. C.:

"The person who has yet to make his first visit to this national shrine (Mount Vernon) is to be envied, for it is an experience long to be remembered. Even the prosaic must catch a fleeting glimpse of crinoline in the box-wood garden, feel the velvet nose of a thoroughbred at the stable bars, hear from the spinet in the music room the sweet notes of 'Sally in Our Alley' or 'Brandywine Quickstep,' get tantalizing whiffs of woodcock roasting in the ample kitchen, and revert to 'long long thoughts' as he stands before the family tomb."

--ooOoo--

And that is all -- for today. I'll be with you again tomorrow.

###